RICHES RESOURCES

05

Digital heritage: intellectual rights, democracy and commoditisation of cultural heritage places

This Think Paper reflects on debates arising from RICHES research regarding the increasing digitisation of cultural heritage places. The analysis highlights concerns about intellectual property rights, democratisation of knowledge and commoditisation of cultural heritage places. It argues that while digital technologies offer new opportunities to experience, consume, conserve and interact with cultural heritage, a balanced approached is needed to ensure the medium plays the role of enhancement rather than replacement or monopolisation.

THINK PAPERS

This Think Paper is one of a collection of Think Papers issued by RICHES in order to stimulate further debate on the issues arising from the research.

Research undertaken by the RICHES project covers a range of subject areas including digital libraries, virtual performance, crafts, fashion, technologies and spaces.

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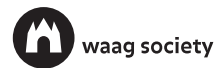n.forbes@coventry.ac.uk

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Eye Shakespeare: Screenshot of the iPhone application of William Shakespeare (Apple 2016)

Digital technologies have become ubiquitous in (re)presentation, promotion and preservation of cultural heritage places. From France's Loire Valley and Shakespeare Birthplace at Stratford-upon-Avon, UK, to all of UNESCO's 911 World Heritage sites like the Rainforests of Atsinanana in Madagascar and the historic centre of Prague in the Czech Republic, digital technologies have transformed their image, marketing, conservation and consumption. For the first time, for example, admirers of William Shakespeare, arguably the greatest playwright in the English language, can view a 3D reconstruction of his final home at Stratford-upon-Avon via the Eye Shakespeare smart phone application. Similarly, internet users can saunter around the historic centre of Prague via Google's Street View interface from wherever they are in the world. Such universal accessibility to these cultural

heritage places, not only increases awareness, enjoyment and fascination with some of our unique treasures, but also encourages participation in their preservation. Moreover, virtual navigation captures a more spherical picture of cultural heritage places than the traditional two-dimensional image of photographs.

While reflections such as these support the efficaciousness of digital technologies in the (re)presentation of cultural heritage places, RICHES research has flagged up some critical issues. These include intellectual property rights, democratisation of knowledge, subjective representations, authenticity and commoditisation of cultural heritage places. For example, Google's Street View interface provides a shortcut to knowledge allowing immersion in virtual spherical and panoramic tours of cultural heritage places using high-definition images. However, such interaction could lead to judgments about places and cultures based on subjective representations regarding what is included or excluded by the author of the images. Moreover, (re)presentation of the public sphere as fact suggests an idealised perspective of what are often complex and contested landscapes, sites and cultural heritage assets. At the same time, the long-term implications of ownership and control of cultural heritage through intellectual property rights have not been determined. For example, could access to certain heritage knowledge domains be restricted in the future by password or payment, thus leading to potential consequences for availability of learning material?

On the move: UNESCO and Google partnership (UNESCO 2009)

According to UNESCO, Google photographs cultural heritage places at their 'suggestion' and with the permission of 'site managers'. However, the world cultural body does not refer to

ownership or intellectual property rights in the images. While those countries that allow the taking of photographs and images of buildings and art works which are permanently located in public places without infringing copyright laws (freedom of panorama[1]), the legislation is not recognised universally. In European countries such as Italy and Belgium, the freedom of panorama does not apply. It is thus unclear who retains the rights for photographs of historic places or art works in Italy, for example, which are made available on the internet via Google's Street View interface. The case for bringing some of the world's cultural heritage wonders, particularly those that are difficult to access or are, in fact, inaccessible to millions of ordinary members of the public, is very straightforward. As such, the agreement between Google and UNESCO fits the criteria of being in the interest of the public (UNESCO 2009). However, the commercial potential of the cultural heritage places and art works captured by Google has yet to be tested and until this happens it is difficult to determine how authorities such as those in Italy, which has more UNESCO-designated World Heritage sites than any other country, will react. Despite this, the Google and UNESCO alliance is set to extend to online access, via Google Maps, YouTube and Google Earth, to maps, texts and videos of UNESCO's Biosphere Reserves, to documentary heritage inscribed on the Memory of the World Register[2] and to endangered languages.

As the scale of Google's collaborations with cultural heritage organisations and groups becomes perspicuous, so do the questions. RICHES research shows such a major intervention to map, document and (re)present our cultural heritage online, could, potentially, have future implications with regards to access to knowledge. While universal access to cultural heritage online can increase participation and decentralization, and empower people to create culture for themselves, the concern is that it is all derived through one source.

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1. Freedom of panorama, which is a phrase derived from the German term Panoramafreiheit, is a provision in the copyright laws of various countries that allows the taking of photographs, video footage and the recreation of public buildings and works or art without infringing copyright laws. However, the provision is not universal and each country has its own rules.

2. The Memory of the World Register lists documentary heritage, which has been recommended by the International Advisory Committee, and endorsed by the Director-General of UNESCO, as corresponding to the selection criteria regarding world significance and outstanding universal value.
(http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/register/)

Commoditisation of cultural heritage places

As RICHES research shows, digital technologies can provide a myriad of routes into cultural heritage. However, there are contradictions as to how to promote deeper and more lasting engagement with the medium. The quandary is how to attract visitors, preserve cultural heritage assets and maintain the meaning(s) culture holds for local people. In this regard, digital technologies are playing a critical role by increasing diversification of the way we engage, interact, conserve and consume cultural heritage. This can be seen by initiatives such as Google Street View's documentation of cultural heritage places, smart phone applications, Google's 3D glasses and virtual reality interfaces. These serve to promote greater interactivity, educational uses and a more flexible refashioning of cultural heritage sites as spaces of consumption. However, increased digitisation of cultural heritage places can spiral interest and visitor numbers (Jones 2014).

Moreover, it can lead to an over reliance on 'digital substitutes' as replacements for actual cultural heritage places and objects to cope with greater numbers of visitors or to counter possible damage caused by overcrowding. It is becoming clear that facing up to issues such as these is the challenge of cultural heritage in the digital age. While debates about authenticity and commoditisation are, perhaps, as old as many cultural heritage places and objects, there is an obvious need for a balanced approach to the digitisation of our cultural assets. Without doubt, digital technologies offer new opportunities to experience, consume, conserve and interact with cultural heritage, but the medium should be seen as a means of enhancement rather than replacement or monopolisation.

References

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"Bringing cultural heritage and people together in a changing Europe and finding new ways of engaging with heritage in a digital world"

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